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**Children of the Ghetto.<sup>1</sup>**

By I. ZANGWILL, Three Vols. (London : W. Heinemann, 1892.)

IN turning over the pages of Mr. Zangwill's very remarkable book, certain echoes of Heine rise unbidden to the mind with haunting persistency. Here, it seems, in our midst is a strange people, practically unknown to all of us who are not Jews, and only a little better known to the greater number of their co-religionists in England. Exiles and refugees, driven out by persecution from their homes in Russia and Poland, they speak a strange language and live a strange exotic life of their own, entirely separated from the jostling crowds around them. The rites and ceremonies they practise are more abundant than those of any other worshippers, and, according to Mr. Zangwill, their lives are ordered with even greater rigidity than those of English Jews in a corresponding class, whom the exiles regard indeed as "link," *i.e.*, lax, almost "heathen," guilty of much falling from grace. But from time to time, out of the midst of this group of aliens, appears a figure familiar to us all. Now it is "Prince Israel," "wallowing all the week long in the filth and refuse of life, amidst the jeers of the boys in the street. . . But every Friday evening . . . a man with the feelings of a man, with head and heart raised aloft, in festal garb, in almost clean garb, he enters the halls of his Father," to woo the beautiful Princess Sabbath.<sup>2</sup>

Now it is our old friend Moses Lump in all his glory. More often still the Heine echo is to be found in the brief completeness of a number of dramatic episodes, which are threaded like separate pearls on a string of dull intermediate pages in the first and second volumes. For unlike Heine, the new poet of the Ghetto is by no means always an artist.

But he knows how to strike the same human cry out of the inarticulate tragedy of clashing traditions, out of the anguish of jarring generations, of exile, of oppression from within and without. He points to fine gold buried in the dust-heaps, and to wisdom and learning hidden in the garrets. He shows how the strange figures, with their un-English faces and queer merchandise, can still weep when they remember their lost Zion, for all the hard bargains driven over the stalls in the narrow lanes off the Whitechapel Road. For

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<sup>1</sup> The EDITORS thought that the readers of this REVIEW might prefer to read the impressions made by this book on the mind of one who has no connection, direct or indirect, with the Ghetto.

<sup>2</sup> The translation is borrowed from Matthew Arnold's essay on Heinrich Heine.

they have brought with them, it seems, into the squalid alleys, a new drama, and new glimpses of the ideal along with a touching submission to a law which is indeed a hard task-master. Those who can speak with complete authority on the subject say that the picture is an absolutely true one in all respects. So it is merely with the literary and artistic aspect of the book that the critic is concerned, and with no question as to its photographic accuracy.

This is particularly fortunate, as the acquaintance of the general public with the hosts of Russian and Polish refugees who pour into London to escape from their persecutors at home, is usually confined to the depressing conviction that they constitute a political and social problem of horrible perplexity. And those whose investigations go a little further are dismally aware that there is a bogey in the background, hidden now behind more popular bogeys, such as the Irish question, but ready to assert himself to some purpose no later than "a most distressful winter" and a cholera season offer him the choicest of opportunities in his London play-ground. But with these matters, Mr. Zangwill and literature are at present not concerned.

The *Children of the Ghetto* is a curiously unequal book! In reading it most people will be roused at times to an enthusiasm of admiration by the dramatic force of several of its situations, by the power and humour of the character sketches, and the true note of its pathos. At such moments they are prompted to exclaim that Mr. Zangwill has written a great book. And great in parts it undoubtedly is. But while this delightful conviction steals over the soul of his reader, while the writer is at his very best—concentrated, terse, full of restrained power or sly humour, and working up finely to his crisis—there comes some soul-shattering interruption, or rather irruption of matter possessing no interest whatever to literature or humanity at large. The wretch Pinchas, for example, is amusing for a page, but he is always elbowing out much better company. In the long run he becomes a weariness to the flesh. The same remark applies to the Sons of the Covenant, the Jargon Players, and above all to the *Flag* newspaper, together with all its internecine squabbles. Whatever topical or local allusions these may contain are necessarily lost upon the outside world. Now this book belongs not to one section of the community, but to that avenging angel the general reader. Two more complaints has this dread personage to prefer against the book as a whole before passing on to an examination of its details.

"The book as a whole"; one pauses over the words themselves, for here at once is a slight stone of stumbling. It has come to us in three volumes, and under one title, but the volumes certainly comprise as

many separate works.<sup>1</sup> First from all points of view are those dramas in miniature referred to before, episodes tragic, or humorous, or both, for there is a deal of human nature in the Ghetto, and its interpreter is not likely to overlook any of its phases. The amusement with which the nineteenth century contemplates the spectacle of life after all lends it more than half its savour, and goes far towards disarming its lesser calamities of their sting. These dramatic idylls (the name must be excused, for no other describes them) contain Mr. Zangwill's best work, and how good that is will be in itself a happy discovery. Interspersed with them are matters of different and quite inferior interest, such as those referred to above, together with some disquisitions which are not entertaining when they stray into a work of imagination. The internecine politics and journalistic quarrels may have their exact counterparts in the real Jewish world, but this does not make them either interesting or artistic as presented in *Children of the Ghetto*. They are far too prominent both in the first and last divisions into which the book seems naturally to fall, and is indeed divided by its author. The "Grand-children of the Ghetto" is a continuous narrative, also complete in itself. It is connected by certain threads with the first part, but the scene is changed. Time, place, and education have separated the fathers from their children, the children from their childhood. The note of warning and of emancipation, which was sounded but intermittently and faintly in Petticoat Lane, blows its full blast in the drawing-rooms where we find ourselves—and little Esther Ansell—again. So far apart and yet so near are the children and the grand-children of the Ghetto.

Non-Jewish readers have one more subject of cavilling with regard to Mr. Zangwill's methods. By the constant introduction of Yiddish and other words strange to the world in general, he has unnecessarily added to the initial difficulties which beset our reading of his book. Already there was the effort of trying to grasp and remember the unaccustomed ritual language and its ceremonial significance; if this was not enough, the strange names and epithets supplied no mean opportunities of mental discipline. It is possible that the "Shool," the "Mezuza," "Shabbos," the "Torah," the "Passover Yigdal," "the Chazan," and countless other terms culled at random from almost any chapter, may be necessary and untranslatable, since

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<sup>1</sup> It appears that the American edition bears the sub-title, "Being Studies of a Peculiar People." Mr. Zangwill should have resisted the pressure which induced him to omit these words from his English title-page. His real intentions as to the form of his work would then have been more obvious to his readers.

they apparently refer to matters of the Law and Religion. Supposing this to be the case, we resign ourselves with a sigh, and murmur for a glossary to obviate the necessity of continually hunting backwards for the original explanation on the part of the weaker brethren, whose memories are shaky. The appalling nature of the proper names is, of course, inevitable. But, after having grappled with these troubles more or less successfully, flesh and spirit rebel when conversation of an entirely lay nature is invaded by incomprehensible words of a barbarous appearance, and only an occasional family likeness to any of the languages generally included in a modern education. It may be replied that the sum of them is not large, but from the moment that they become troublesome, and at all baffling to those without special instruction, their introduction is an artistic mistake.

So much for general cavillings. Their very nature shows how strong is the interest which the book arouses, how keen is the resentment of all that interferes with its appointed course. We would all enjoy to the very utmost its artistic beauties, and indulge the friendly—entirely sympathetic—curiosity it arouses about those of whom it mainly treats, the poor, who are as widely separated from the ordinary inhabitants of Whitechapel as the East is from the West. If anyone has any doubts about this, let him take a stroll—scuffle would be a more appropriate word—though the crowds who are haggling over every description of strange merchandise in the thoroughfares of Middlesex Street (“the Lane”), and the adjacent alleys of a Sunday morning. To those interested in all varieties of their fellow-men, it is an experience which repays the trouble. To enlarge upon scenes which Mr. Zangwill has so finely described would be as presumptuous as it is unnecessary. Suffice it to say that you find at once you have set foot in a far country. The “Children of the Ghetto,” who cross your path in the flesh, recall over and over again, the types in the book, with their Semitic faces, their strange tongues, their keen expression, and their mildly humorous tolerance of the stranger who has come to see the sights of Petticoat Lane.

We, too, amongst our own poor, can point to many a devout spirit blossoming in the desert of material deprivation. The sordid struggle for bread proves occasionally only the rude nurse of minds of gentle and heroic temper, of a faith in the Divine which has been tried seven times in the furnace; but souls such as these must be rare in all walks of life. What appears to distinguish the Eastern colony in the pages of Mr. Zangwill's work is the general, almost universal, submission amongst them to every detail of that ancient code which handicaps them so materially in the race for a livelihood amongst their Christian

neighbours. The multiplicity of minute observances which many a Protestant has been taught to look upon with some distrust as deadening rather than quickening to the spiritual life, does actually seem, in the case of these children of the older covenant, to maintain that sense of the ideal and the unseen in daily life, which is the object of all religious ceremonial. In that generation of them which is so rapidly passing away, hearts which have any capacity for uplifting themselves, can and do use the mass of observances and ceremonies, which hems in their daily lives, as "the bridge to God." Time, education, and circumstance, in breeding a natural revolt against the yoke of such laws, are but little likely to substitute in their place fresh aids to that religion of the heart which is its own incentive. These are reflections naturally suggested by the book, but they must not be allowed to occupy further space in a review.

It is impossible not to dwell in greater detail over the sketches of this street life, for, as said before, their quality is rare and fine. The key-note to them is struck at once, in the opening words of the "Proem"—full of significance and beauty they are.

"Not here in our London Ghetto the gates and gaberdines of the olden Ghetto of the Eternal City ; yet no lack of signs external by which one may know it, and those who dwell therein. Its narrow streets have no specialty of architecture, its dirt is not picturesque. It is no longer the stage for the high-buskined tragedy of massacre and martyrdom ; only for the obscurer, deeper tragedy that evolves from the pressure of its own inward forces, and the long drawn-out tragi-comedy of sordid and shifty poverty . . . (it is) a world which hides beneath its stony and unlovely surface an inner world of dreams, fantastic and poetic as the mirage of the Orient, where they were woven, of superstitions grotesque as the cathedral gargoyles of the Dark Ages, in which they had birth. And over all lie tenderly some streaks of celestial light shining from the face of the great Law-giver.

"The folk who compose our pictures are children of the Ghetto. Their faults are bred of its hovering miasma of persecution, their virtues straitened and intensified by the narrowness of its horizon."

It is necessary to bear these words, and others which follow them, in mind ; they are the clue to the whole book and the struggles of which it treats. The rest of the proem consists of some valuable explanations about the Jewish community in England, past and present, a striking little story or anecdote whose connection with the rest of the chapter is not very obvious, followed by some paragraphs of surprisingly cheap sentiment and trite moralising.

These introductory pages, with their odd mixture of poetry, tender-

ness, humour, power, irrelevance, and sheer alloy are curiously characteristic of the whole book.

Then we come to the life of the Ghetto itself, and to Esther Ansell, upon whose fragile shoulders rests the burden of preserving what unity there is in the three volumes. Later on she is the connecting link also between the elders and the rising generation. At this early period of her career she is a little eager, sensitive creature, absorbed in the cares of her family of small brothers and sisters, motherless young birds with a bed-ridden Polish grandmother, and all dependent upon the dreamiest of fervent pietists. This Elijah with no attendant ravens, is one of the striking figures in the book ; he is an enthusiast, whose delight in the manifold ceremonies and observances of his religion is only matched by his incapacity to provide for the earthly needs of his children. His prosperous cousin, Malka, had a poor opinion of him as a general rule, but when her daughter hung between life and death, "Moses was sent for post-haste, to intercede with the Almighty. His piety, it was felt, would command attention. For an average of three hundred and sixty-two days a year Moses was a miserable worm, a nonentity ; but on the other three, when death threatened to visit Malka or her little clan, Moses became a personage of prime importance, and was summoned at all hours of the day and night to wrestle with the angel Azrael. . . . Give him (Moses) two solid meals and three solid services a day, and he was satisfied, and he craved more for spiritual snacks between meals than for physical."

A still more lovable, more spiritual, and in some ways equally aggravating earthly saint is Reb Shemuel. The forms and ceremonies in which he too delights lead him more directly heavenwards, have less of the outward husk about them. This learned sage is one of the gentlest and tenderest of men, but, like Abraham, he does not flinch when he believes the divine voice bids him put the sacrificial knife to the throat of his daughter's happiness. No episode in the book is quite so impressive, to our thinking, as the love, and grief, and vain regret of Hannah Jacobs and David Brandon. It is told with admirable restraint, but with great dramatic power. The terse short sentences have all the effect of quick-drawn human breaths in moments of anguish and suspense. First, there is the party given in honour of the redemption of Malka's grandson—a delightful party ! The frolic of the young people ; the ring intended for the betrothed bride placed in jest on Hannah's finger by Samuel Levine, while he rehearses the words in which he will pledge himself to Leah when the time for the solemnity arrives. Then the bolt falls from the blue with the startled exclamation of old Hyams, and the discovery that

the words spoken in jest to the wrong woman have a terrible binding power, according to that law which is not our law. The weeping and cursing is appeased by the solution of divorce from the mock marriage, by Levine "giving Hannah gett," and the sky clears again. Soon afterwards Hannah meets David Brandon at the Purim ball. To this scene we take some exception. Their opening flirtation is, alas ! of a thin and vulgar quality, unworthy of what follows. The play of the young people becomes earnest, and their devotion reciprocal. Reb Shemuel's love for his daughter conquers his disapproval of David's weak-kneed orthodoxy, and he blesses the happy lovers in a charming scene, on a festival night when all the joyful lights of the Passover illumine his home. Once more a winged terror of forgotten law strikes a death-blow at human happiness. This time its aim is sure. David Brandon innocently reveals the fact that he is a *Cohen*, i.e., belonging to the Priestly class. Now it is ordained that a *Cohen* cannot marry a divorced woman, and to Reb Shemuel such an ordinance offers a final barrier, against which all human and natural emotions avail nothing. The scene is an exceptionally fine one. The inflexibility of the son of the law overwhelms all the instincts of the father. Who can "go behind the Torah"? he asks pitifully, in answer to the denunciations of the lovers. David is a child of the nineteenth century. Hannah has drunk of the same fountain of rationalism, but she is a woman, and one whose bondage to her traditions lies deeper than she knows. Next night all is prepared for her flight with David into the great outer world, when the gates of the Ghetto, and all that has hitherto composed her life, will close behind her for ever. It is Seder-night, and she goes once more through the service with Reb Shemuel, whose child-like faith takes it for granted that the final act of his domestic drama is being played out in silent submission and humility. After supper she will slip away to join the man from whom a law which she cannot acknowledge as either human or divine would arbitrarily separate her. To-night the Seder-service was to mark *her* exodus from bondage, she thought. But did it? When the hour came, and passed, her lover waited alone outside in the murk and darkness of the street. Later on, when she flings open the door, as the Passover ceremonial directs, and meets his half-frenzied summons face to face, all she can say is a dazed "Good-bye." Then she slams the street door in his face. The desperate man without shakes it violently. "What's that noise?" asks the Rebbitzin (her mother). "Only some Christian rough shouting in the street," answered Hannah. It was truer than she knew.

And here the curtain falls on the Ghetto, and the first part of the book is at an end.



It contains many another episode only a little inferior in strength and dramatic quality to that on which we have dwelt at too great length. There is no space even to refer to them, but this is of little importance if the reader is encouraged to investigate for himself the humours of Malka, of Sugarman and their companions; the pathos of the Hyamses' Honeymoon and so forth. Some of the scenes suffer from careless writing, and bear evidences of slipshod haste, which is the more annoying as Mr. Zangwill's style, when he is at his best, is remarkably pure and concentrated. The grand-children of the Ghetto who take their ease in "West-end" drawing-rooms (what a degraded flavour of counter-jumping cockneyism the word always suggests!) are decidedly less interesting to the public than their forbears in the narrow lanes of Whitechapel. The barrier which separates them from all the rest of wealthy middle-class England is less perceptible, more psychological. The drama of re-action and revolt is being fought out here with light words and winged mockeries, though sometimes, perhaps with an underlying and intimate tragedy of struggle, and a beating against the fetters of passionate race-feeling bred in the bone, written unawares on many a heart, which only discovered the token when it was put to the test. Esther Ansell re-appears metamorphosed into a young lady, the adopted child of the wealthy Henry Goldsmith's who carried her away into their Kensington home, when her relations emigrated to America years before. The sensitive girl with her keen wits and ready self-mockery, her critical spirit, her craving for spiritual liberty, all weighted by her passionate loyalty of heart, fights out her own salvation after her own manner. Raphael Leon, who plays so important a part in her life, is a somewhat shadowy person, suggestive of beautiful possibilities. The modern young men, such as Sidney Graham, who direct so many shafts of wit at their own community, and whose methods of self-emancipation are more entertaining than they are admirable, are drawn with few but firm touches. Nevertheless the "Grand-children of the Ghetto" come with a certain chill of disappointment after the high strung emotions and peculiar humours of the first part of the book. The author here falls into more frequent infirmities of taste; his touch is far less sure. The drawing-room manners, for instance, of his characters betray hazardous eccentricities at times. On the other hand, the yearning which draws Esther Ansell back to her early home, and her flight thither, are as good as anything in the three volumes. After all, can one not say it is a great book? It is so very nearly one! With ruthless expurgations, with a certain amount of pulling together, with greater care as to the writing, it would have reached high-water mark.

M. C. BIRCHENOUGH.